

Mary Harris Jones: A Union Crusader

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Although labor unions are very popular today, they were rarely mentioned in the 1800s. Mary Harris helped change that. In 1830, Mary was born in Cork, Ireland. Little did her parents know that their child would grow up to be a real hero. Mary Harris, also known as Mother Jones, changed the world's perspective on labor unions.

Ireland was experiencing a war as Mary grew up. She witnessed many horrifying events, the killing of many men, women, and children. Her father fled to America searching for freedom. Later he sent for his family, and in 1841, the family was reunited, settling in Toronto, Canada. After Mary finished school, she found a teaching position at a convent in Monroe, Michigan. She taught there for several years before moving to Chicago, Illinois, where she found it was very difficult to earn a living. After living in Chicago for only two years, she moved to Memphis, Tennessee. There she married and had four children. In 1867, a yellow fever epidemic swept through Memphis, killing hundreds, including Mary's husband and four children. In 1867, Mary moved back to Chicago and opened a successful dressmaking shop.

In 1871, despite her good fortune, Mary lost all of her belongings in the Great Chicago Fire. She lost her dressmaking establishment, and had no idea where to turn. She heard about a labor organization called the Knights of Labor in Pennsylvania. Mary decided to go to a meeting and see if she liked it. She attended one of the meetings and was greatly inspired by the speakers. The powerful words spoken stimulated Mary to dedicate her life to the labor cause and help resolve labor problems. After several meetings, Mother Jones began working for the

Knights of Labor full time. She, herself, was able to inspire hundreds of laborers to defend themselves during strikes and disputes.

In 1891, Mary traveled to Norton, Virginia, to help striking coal miners. Many of the strikes were part of a new union, the United Mine Workers of America, founded in late 1889. This was the very first coal mining strike. Mary helped with it and learned it would take time to find a solution. Mary had always thought mining was cruel work. The men labored twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week, in dark, bottomless pits underneath the ground. Mary thought the rights of the coal miners were being violated since the men were not able to hold mining meetings or be interrupted even during breaks. As Mary was trying to resolve the situation, she received a warning that she would be killed if she did not leave Norton, Virginia, immediately. She was labeled a unionist, and in those days, unionists were not thought of highly. However, being the independent woman she was, Mary stayed in Norton until her job was done. She even joined the United Mine Workers organizers, even though she was not an official of the union. However, striking coal miners did not benefit from the strike. The miners received no recognition from the strike, and the ones involved in the strike lost their jobs.

In the spring of 1920, with many strikes behind her, Mary set out for California to visit a friend. While there, reporters were eager to speak with her about her career. Mary granted the reporters several interviews.

Troubled by sickness and old age, Mary wrote her autobiography. She retired to Silver Springs, Maryland, where she died on November 30, 1930. Her body was brought to Mt. Olive, Illinois, on a special train. She was laid to rest in the Mt. Olive Miners Cemetery. Over twenty thousand people came to mourn and honor the life of Mary Harris Jones.

[From Edward Steel, *The Court-Martial of Mother Jones*; Dale Fetherling, *Mother Jones, The Miners' Angel*; Linda Atkinson, *Mother Jones*.]